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Iran Training Kamikaze Pilots

In an ominous replay of the closing days of World War II, Iranian pilots have been trained to fly light planes loaded with explosives on suicide missions against U.S. warships in the Mediterranean or land facilities throughout the Middle East.

According to our intelligence sources—including an Iranian defector—the young Iranian pilots are as fanatically dedicated to the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as Japanese kamikaze pilots were to Emperor Hirohito in 1945. The kamikazes destroyed 36 U.S. warships and damaged 368 in the battle of Okinawa.

What makes the possibility of suicide attacks on the Sixth Fleet particularly galling is the fact that the aircraft that would be used were made in West Germany and Switzerland. The two types of planes may be able to evade the U.S. warships' radar protection; on land, it would be virtually impossible to protect American embassies against an airborne suicide attack.

Up to now, Iranian-controlled Shiite terrorists have been using hijackings and suicidal truck bombers. But the kamikaze force, potentially far more dangerous, has been steadily growing. Indeed, our sources believe that only the continuation of Iran's war with Iraq has kept Khomeini from unleashing his suicide pilots against U.S. targets.

The Iranian kamikazes were first trained on powered gliders in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley of eastern Lebanon. The Syrians bought the aircraft from West German firms in 1981-82, intending to lend them to Palestinian guerrillas. But

the 1982 Syrian split with the Palestine Liberation Organization spelled an end to that scheme.

So the Syrians offered the gliders to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who had been invited into the Bekaa that year.

Top-secret minutes of a high-level meeting in Tehran in mid-1984 disclose that the Iranian leaders were enthusiastic about expanding the kamikaze unit, but dissatisfied with the performance of the West German gliders.

The replacement they chose was the Swiss Pilatus PC7, usually used for crop dusting. Iran bought 80 Pilatus planes in 1984; the Swiss maintain they thought the planes would be used for agriculture, rescue missions and pilot training.

The Swiss were alarmed when they belatedly discovered that some of the technical documents shipped to Iran included instructions on converting the PC7 into a warplane.

The kamikazes began training in the Swiss planes at Bushire, the main Iranian fighter-bomber airbase on the Persian Gulf. Later they were sent to Won San, North Korea, for further training.

But even the minimal flying skills required of suicide pilots proved beyond several of the Iranian volunteers, who perished during low-level flight exercises. One who survived was Hushang Mortezaei, who defected the first chance he got.

Now hiding in London, Mortezaei has told his debriefers it's not surprising that he was the only one of Khomeini's kamikazes to defect. "I must tell you that my comrades are 100 percent fanatics," he explained. "They are preparing to make their strikes and nothing will stop them."